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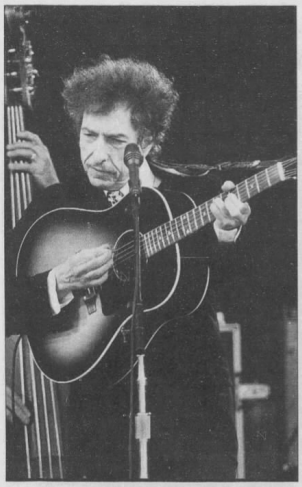

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: NILS MEILVANG, AFP/GETTY IMAGES; STEPHEN LOVEKIN, GETTY IMAGES; GAZETTE FILE PHOTO; POSTMEDIA FILE PHOTO; POSTMEDIA FILE PHOTO

Clockwise from left: Bob Dylan continues to fascinate; New York's Carnegie Hall celebrated its 120th anniversary with a gala in April; French chanteuse Edith Piaf was an international sensation; k.d. lang is among the artists covered in Have Not Been the Same; Nick Drake, who died in 1974 at age 26 was all but ignored in his lifetime.

The Dears: Lost in the Plot, by Lorraine Carpenter (Invisible, 91 pages, $12.95) is unlikely to reach many beyond the Dears cult's hardcore, but for them it will be a treat. Carpenter, long a music writer at the Montreal Mirror, cheerfully admits to being a friend of bandleader Murray Lightburn, and she turns her lack of objectivity into a strength, communicating a fan's stake in the band's bad luck and eliciting quotes of genuine frankness from members. A caveat: detailed song-by-song descriptions of the band's oeuvre are pointless if you haven't heard the songs, redundant if you have.

Speaking of cult artists, one of the ultimate is the subject of **Nick Drake: The Pink Moon Files,** by Jason Creed, (Omnibus Press, 230 pages, $24.95). Dead of a suspected overdose at age 26 in 1974 after releasing three albums of increasingly dark-themed chamber folk, Drake rightly or wrongly has come to epitomize a certain doomed romantic strain running throughout British literary and musical history. After being all but ignored in his lifetime, his work has gathered a growing following ever since, its mystique enhanced by a paucity of hard information on the reclusive artist's life. Creed's book has its origins in a zine he published between 1994 and 2000; like many such fan-driven projects, it walks a fine line between appreciative and fawning, and it certainly could have done with some editing for repetition. But in among the earnestness and recycled press clippings are some quite affecting tributes, including a piece titled A Memoir of My Childhood Friend by one Andrew Hicks, who grew up alongside Drake in the village of Tanworth-in-Arden but discovered his music only recently: "I do not always feel robust enough to face its emotional challenge, but when I do it is always to good effect."

Two titles from the reinvigorated and (to put it mildly) quirky bilingual Montreal publisher L'Oie de Cravan shine light on underappreciated mavericks. **C'est La Guerre: Collected Early Writings 1978-1983,** by Byron Coley (140 pages, $16) spotlights a rock writer and critic whose early efforts often show the influence of his stated mentor Richard Meltzer. Coley came of age at a time when rock writers were expected to match their subjects excess for excess, and were blissfully unaware of the coming scourge of political correctness. The results are by turns invigorating and infuriating, as when, reviewing a Clash concert in 1979, Coley dares to attack their opening act, the sacred Bo Diddley: "Half the crowd went out into the lobby at the very sight of this paunchy pederast." **The Words to the Songs of Michael Hurley** (48 page, $16) pays tribute to the folksinger, painter and "old-timey existentialist" (cf. Robert Christgau) who has been defining one brand of the hippie ethos since before the word hippie was coined. Anyone curious is urged to seek out the truly far-out 1976 album Have Moicy!, whose deathless The Slurf Song finally gets the French translation the world has been waiting for, as La Chanson du Souillon. Handmade books like L'Oie de Cravan's not only reflect perfectly the spirit of an artist like Hurley, but constitute an immaculate thumbing of the nose to the forces of digitization. Both reviewed titles are translated by Marie Frankland.

No Regrets: The Life of Edith Piaf, by Carolyn Burke (Knopf, 282 pages, $32) recounts the life of the Amy Winehouse of her time – if, that is, Amy Winehouse were not just a protean talent with a weakness for substances and bad boyfriends, but an international culture heroine. Burke is smart enough not to indulge in the kind of hindsight-aided amateur psychoanalysis that too often hobbles biographies of troubled figures like Piaf, recognizing that the facts of the life – and Burke unearths a few amazing new ones about the singer's role in the French Resistance – are so remarkable that a straightforward telling is all that's required.

Finally, **Carnegie Hall Treasures,** by Tim Page and Carnegie Hall (HarperDesign, 224 pages, $82), marks the 120th anniversary of the iconic New York concert venue – a building whose central place in the history of music since 1890 all but defies comment – in suitably sumptuous style. A lavishly illustrated volume on the Hall's history is accompanied, in a slipcase, by a collection of facsimile ephemera – tickets, programs, flyers, etc., all of uncanny quality. The multimedia keepsake volume has become a genre unto itself in the past decade or so: Carnegie Hall Treasures is one of the best.

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